

Understanding Between Parents and Children¹

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Part 1 – Swamiji With Parents Insights on Bringing Up Children

Communicating With Your Children

Finding a balance between trusting your children and checking up on them is one big issue. Recently, during a discussion with some parents and children, a father said that his son, who was in junior high school, was suspended from school for four days, along with three of his friends, because he had taken alcohol. The boy's parents were called to the school, and, afterwards, there was counseling for the children and what not.

The boy told his parents that his friends had given him a soft drink, and he didn't know that they had put some alcohol in it. When he told me that, I said, "I will trust your words and go by your words even though it is very difficult to believe your story. In the world, there are a lot of things that we cannot believe, but they are true. I believe your story because I trust you. But that is all over now. Hereafter, you should be able to say no.

Human beings have the freedom to say either yes or no. It is our choice. An animal doesn't have that freedom of choice. If it feels like doing something, it instinctively does it. Whatever its programming is, it goes by that. It can be programmed to do something, and it will do it. But a human being has a choice—he can say no. That is our human freedom. I told the boy, "There is nothing wrong in saying no. In fact, you have to say no. People will respect you for that."

You need to trust your children. If you trust them, they will cheat on you; and if you don't trust them, they will cheat on you, so what are you going to do? They are out of the house most of the time. You can't spy on them. It is good to develop a clean dialogue with them—"What did you do today?" and so on.

Daily, you need to take an interest in their activities. Keep track of them. The children should be able to tell you all that they feel. They want to tell you exactly how they feel and what they are doing, but they cannot tell you certain things because you cannot handle that. Therefore, they don't tell you. They will tell you only what you can handle.

You need to trust your children and their capacity to say no. You have to tell them when to say no; what to say no to; and what are the things you expect of them. Keep the channel of communication open. You must keep talking to them. That is the most important thing; otherwise, they are going to talk to somebody else, and that is where all the problems start.

Parents here in America cannot be the same as parents in India. In India, the parents don't talk to their children. Why? Because it is a joint-family culture where Father and his brother and all their children live together. Talking to one's own children, not to the other children, is always a little embarrassing. So they talk to their brother's children, and the brother talks to their children. The children have a good relationship with their uncle. And also there is a grandfather living with them, so there is always an empty lap available. Therefore, the processing takes place all the time. Nowadays, where is the empty lap? If there is an empty lap, there is a laptop on it. Therefore, children come to my lap and sit.

¹ Swami Dayananda's talks to parents and their children at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA, 2004, transcribed by John Lehosky and edited by Sharon Cliff.

Competition

It is a wrong habit to compare your child with another child. You should consult the other child—“What does *your* mother say? What does *your* father say?” “My mother always says, ‘Look at that other child’.” Everybody thinks that the other child is doing very well. Perhaps, the other child *is* doing well in a particular field. Maybe somebody is good in music or in something else. Each child has its own plus and minus.

Sometimes healthy competition is good, but you don’t need to create competition at home. In the school itself, there is so much competition. We don’t know if it is healthy or unhealthy. This is a competitive society. However, we Indians come from a non-competitive society. Honestly, we didn’t have any competition in India. Our culture is a non-competitive culture.

The son of a priest becomes a priest and marries the daughter of a priest. Even today it is the same—every priest is the son of a priest. There was no choice in the profession. His father was a priest, his grandfather was a priest, and his great grandfather was a priest. It is a *parampara*. There is nothing peculiar about it. All over the country it was like that. Even people who are given to begging have their own *parampara*. A snake charmer is the son of a snake charmer, and his grandfather was a snake charmer, and he marries the daughter of a snake charmer. That is how the society was—zero competition.

We have no culture for competition. We have simply been pushed into a world of competition without knowing how to compete. Therefore, people grab as much as they can. That is what is happening. There was no competition in India; then you find yourself in a competitive society here in this country. Parents push their children to compete because suddenly they discover that they have to compete. Indians don’t have a relaxed attitude towards competition. It is always some kind of aggressive competition. I don’t want anybody to be aggressive.

We have to understand that we need not compare one child with another child. Everybody has his own something, his own plusses and minuses. Perhaps, it would be best if you think about your own talents and your husband’s talents. With both of your talents combined, what kind of talent would the child have? Think of that! In fact, it is a surprise that the child has any talent at all. Just enjoy your child. Don’t push him or her too much. There is unnecessary pushing all the time. Then, after the child graduates from high school, and you ask what he or she wants to do, the reply is, “I’m thinking about it!”

Understand Your Ambitions for Your Children

In India, there is no question—the student goes to college; finishes all his or her studies; becomes a doctor or a professional; then, afterwards, starts his or her life. But here in this country, after high school, the student thinks that he would like to take off for a year or else study music or the drums. The parents always imagined that their child was going to study and become a great professional or scientist in America. All those things that the parents wanted to do originally they want their child to do now. They want to accomplish varieties of things through their children. However, the children have their own minds and thinking, and what they want to do has nothing to do with what the parent’s ambitions are for them.

Perhaps, you wanted your child to be a doctor. That is a very big thing in this country. Indian parents always want their children to be doctors. Male or female, all of them should become doctors or lawyers. They should have some doctorate somewhere—microbiology at least. They want their children to be doing *something*. And the child says, “I’m going to try art.” He doesn’t have that same sense of insecurity that you have. We were pushed into a competitive society from a totally non-competitive society. We wanted to accomplish something so that we could be somebody here, like people from the Jewish culture.

Talk To Your Child

There is a problem of how to talk to your children, how to communicate with them. Parents need to keep talking to their children. Daily, ask them questions about what they did in school that day. Even ask them about small things. A mother was attending a three-month course at the *gurukulam* with a child who was attending a nearby school. Every day, when the child came home from school, I used to sit with her and ask, “What did you do today? How was your school? What happened?”

There are so many things for the child to talk about and discuss. To you it may be small talk, but for the child it is big. Make the child talk about all the little things that he or she did that day. That is a beautiful thing to do. In other words, you have to become a child. Just watch how two friends talk for some time. It is interesting. If you watch them, you will know how many subjects that they talk about. It is silly, but that is how they talk. You have to understand that that is their level. They don’t talk about one subject matter all the time. In fact, going to school, studying, and all that is one thing, but the most enjoyable thing for them is to meet other children and talk.

School is boring, but sometimes they enjoy their classes. Certain subjects they enjoy; certain subjects they don’t enjoy. If they understand their classes, they will enjoy them. If you watch them, you will find what they talk about is very interesting. The best way to talk to your children is to make them talk, and don’t show disinterest. Sometimes when you ask a question and they answer, your mind is elsewhere. You must stay with them. It is very important. I do all of this. I communicate with children very well. They ask me questions, and I talk to them at that level. I have no problem with them. I don’t say they will talk to you the same way, but there is no reason why they should not. You have to ask questions. Ask them to narrate what happened.

How To Respond To Your Children When There Are Problems

There is a question of how the parents should react when their child tells the truth about doing something that he or she is not supposed to do. The parents need to respond according to the seriousness of the matter. If it is something very serious, like taking drugs with some friends, then you have to say, “That is very serious.” You can’t simply say, “That is okay; next time be careful.” That is not enough. Take it seriously! Ask, “Who are your friends?” And say, “You must change your friends. You cannot take drugs. You will lose yourself, and I will lose you, and I don’t want to lose you.” You have to show the seriousness of the situation. You have to say, “You must change your ways and your friends. But I back you up.”

You have to be very, very careful about how much you say and how much you protest. You have to make sure that the child understands how much he or she has upset you and how serious the matter is. Make the child understand. Tell him or her, “I am very happy that you told the truth, and I am proud of you for that, but I am upset by everything else.” It all depends upon what kind of a situation it is. There is no blanket rule.

Finally, enjoy your children! They are a gift from the Lord. Don’t become too serious. Have a sense of humor! Everything will be okay. If you can make it, your children will definitely make it.